

# Ministry Under God's Strong Hand

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[ 0 : 00 ] Good. Well, let's turn to our reading. And we are in the book of Ezekiel, and we have plenty of Vista Bibles at the back, the side. So do please grab a Bible if you don't have one with you. And we're looking this evening at Ezekiel, chapter 2 and 3.

We're going to pick it up in Ezekiel, chapter 2, verse 1, and we'll read through to chapter 3, verse 15.

Let me just read the very last sentence of the previous chapter. And I heard the voice of one speaking.

And he said to me, Son of man, stand on your feet, and I will speak with you. And as he spoke to me, the Spirit entered into me and set me on my feet, and I heard him speaking to me.

And he said to me, Son of man, I send you to the people of Israel, to nations of rebels who rebelled against me. They and their fathers have transgressed against me to this very day.

[ 1 : 23 ] The descendants also are impotent and stubborn. I send you to them, and you shall say to them, Thus says the Lord God.

And whether they hear or refuse to hear, for they are a rebellious house, they will know that a prophet has been among them. And you, son of man, be not afraid of them, nor be afraid of their words.

Though briars and thorns are with you and sit on scorpions, Do not, be not afraid of their words, nor be dismayed at their looks, for they are a rebellious house.

And you shall speak my words to them, whether they hear or refuse to hear, for they are a rebellious house. But you, son of man, hear what I say to you.

Be not rebellious like that rebellious house. Open your mouth and eat what I give you. And when I looked, behold, a hand was stretched out to me, and behold, a scroll of a book was in it.

[ 2 : 37 ] And he spread it before me. And it had writing on the front and on the back, and they were written on it words of lamentation and mourning and woe. And he said to me, Son of man, eat whatever you find here.

Eat this scroll and go speak to the house of Israel. So I opened my mouth, and he gave me this scroll to eat. And he said to me, Son of man, feed your belly with this scroll that I give you, and fill your stomach with it.

Then I ate it, and it was in my mouth as sweet as honey. And he said to me, Son of man, go to the house of Israel and speak with my words to them.

For you are not sent to a people of foreign speech and a hard language, but to the house of Israel. Not to many peoples of foreign speech and a hard language whose words you cannot understand. Surely, if I sent you to such, they would listen to you. But the house of Israel will not be willing to listen to you, for they are not willing to listen to me.

[ 3 : 47 ] Because all the house of Israel have a hard forehead and a stubborn heart. Behold, I have made your face as hard as their faces, and your forehead as far as their foreheads.

Like emery harder than flint have I made your forehead. Fear them not, nor be dismayed at their looks, for they are a rebellious house.

Moreover, he said to me, Son of man, all my words that I shall speak to you receive in your heart and hear with your ears and go to the exiles to your people and speak to them and say to them, Thus says the Lord God, whether they hear or refuse to hear.

Then the Spirit lifted me up, and I heard behind me the voice of a great earthquake, Blessed be the glory of the Lord from its place.

It was the sound of the wings of the living creatures as they touched one another, and the sound of the wheels beside them, and the sound of a great earthquake. The Spirit lifted me up and took me

away, and I went in bitterness in the heat of my spirit, the hand of the Lord being strong upon me. [ 5 : 07 ] And I came to the exiles at Tel Abib, who were dwelling by the Cabot Canal, and I sat where they were dwelling, and I sat there overwhelmed among them seven days.

Amen. May God bless his words. Would you turn back to Ezekiel chapter 3, and we're going to read from verse 16 to the end of the chapter.

I sat there overwhelmed, among them, seven days. And at the end of seven days, the word of the Lord came to me, Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel.

Whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me, or warning about me. If I say to the wicked, you shall surely die, and you give him no warning, nor speak to warn the wicked from his wicked way in order to save his life, that wicked person shall die for his iniquity, but his blood I will require at your hand.

But if you warn the wicked, and he does not turn from his wickedness or from his wicked way, he shall die for his iniquity, but you will have delivered your soul. Again, if a righteous person turns from his righteousness and commits injustice, and I lay a stumbling block before him, he shall die.

[ 6 : 46 ] Because you have not warned him, he shall die for his sin, and his righteous deeds that he has done shall not be remembered, but his blood I will require at your hand.

But if you warn the righteous person not to sin, and he does not sin, he shall surely live, because he took the warning, and you will have delivered your soul.

And the hand of the Lord was upon me there, and he said to me, Arise, go out into the valley, and there I will speak with you. So I rose and went out into the valley, and behold, the glory of the Lord stood there like the glory I had seen by the Chebar Canal, and I fell on my face.

But the Spirit entered into me, and set me on my feet, and he spoke with me. And he said to me, Go, shut yourself within your house, and you, O Son of Man, behold, cords will be placed upon you, and you shall be bound with them, so that you cannot go out among the people.

And I will make your tongue cling to the roof of your mouth, so that you shall be mute and unable to, well, not reprove better mediate for them or intercede for them, for they are a rebellious house.

[ 8 : 06 ] But when I speak with you, I will open your mouth, and you shall say to them, Thus says the Lord God, He who will hear, let him hear, and he who will refuse to hear, let him refuse, for they are a rebellious house.

keep your Bibles open, let's pray together, and then we'll look at this passage together. Heavenly Father, open our eyes, we pray, that we may indeed see wondrous things out of this your law, and open our hearts, that we might not be rebellious, but might receive, take in, and truly inwardly digest all that you have to say to us this evening, for Christ's sake.

Amen. What does a truly God-ordained, authoritative ministry look like, and feel like, whether that's those who are especially set apart to serve God's church, or indeed among all Christians who are served, called to serve the gospel in the world.

It's a very important question that, because Jesus and his apostles talk a lot about it. In fact, many of the New Testament letters are very concerned, aren't they, to be sure that Christians and churches, that they recognize true ministry, and reject false ministry.

And many, it seems, couldn't do that very easily. That's why Paul had to spend so much of his own time defending his own ministry and other true apostolic ministry against those who thought they were more impressive and authoritative and people thought were more impressive and authoritative.

[ 9 : 59 ] The Corinthians, remember, criticized Paul's preaching, didn't they? It didn't seem very impressive to them at all. It seemed very feeble. And people sometimes do, don't they? They certainly want a certain sound, a certain spiritual wow factor.

And they'll say, oh, that's the real McCoy. That's real preaching. That was the Corinthians. And Paul, who was, of course, the spirit-inspired apostle of Christ, the man with the real divine unction upon him, who spoke with full divine authority, was to their eyes, and he was just weak and feeble and unimpressive.

How wrong they were. Corinthians, of course, thought themselves very superior in their theology and in their spirituality. But Paul, the true minister of God, for all his apparent lack of charisma to them, he exposed them, didn't he, with all the authority of Christ as being just proud and puffed up and actually just utterly worldly in their thinking.

As people usually are who talk in those sorts of terms. The first disciples, remember, were rebuked just like that one time by Jesus. Do you remember when Jesus said to them, when they were jockeying for position and authority, he said, the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them and their great ones exercise authority over them, not so among you.

Whoever will be first among you must be the slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve. And they learned a lesson, of course. Peter later wrote to the Christians, telling them about the mark of real authority and oversight and shepherding of the flock through teaching and in others.

[ 11 : 53 ] And you'll find that, he says, among those who humble themselves under the mighty hand of God. To those, Peter says, that God will exalt in his time and in his way.

And as it is for leaders, so it is for the whole church, says Peter. The marks of God's hand upon your witness in a hostile world will be, he says, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind. So if we want to impact the world with the gospel and witness to Christ with his authority, Peter says we need to be under authority, his authority.

We need to be humbled under his strong hand, to guard our hearts and to guide our lips. But what does that look like in practice?

Well, here in Ezekiel 2 and 3 is the account of Ezekiel's commissioning by God to his true and authoritative ministry as God's spokesman. And we're given a very full picture here, aren't we, of what ministry under the strong hand of God will look like and sound like and feel like.

[ 13 : 04 ] Three times in these first three chapters we're told the hand of the Lord was upon Ezekiel. Chapter 1 verse 3, chapter 3 verse 22 here, and also emphatically there in the middle in chapter 3 verse 14, the hand of the Lord being strong upon me.

So we're to be in no doubt, are we, here is a ministry under the strong hand of God. And here's a very clear picture of what the task of being a true workman for God and a true spokesman for God looks like according to God himself with all God's authority.

So what will it be like in the real world for all who are called to be God's witnesses to the very ends of the earth, speaking the truth of the gospel in the face of resistance in the rebellious hearts of men and women in the world.

And, and this ought to wake us up, and above all, to the rebellious hearts within the household of faith. Because that's what these chapters are showing us.

That's a long passage, but it does all belong together. We're going to look at it in four sections. The first paragraph and the last paragraph are like brackets, balancing each other, focusing on the nature and the task of the proclamation.

[ 14 : 24 ] And in between, it speaks about the preparation of God's messenger and then also the purpose of the message. So first of all, look at verses 1 to 7 of chapter 2. Here we have the call to God's workmen.

And the message is clear, the true workmen of God must be realistic about both the grim rejection of God's word that he'll see, but also, albeit grudgingly, a recognition of true witness that will be vindicated.

After seeing this overwhelming vision of the glory of God, Ezekiel now hears the voice of God speaking to him. And he receives this call to service.

Now he's not yet given any of the content of his message, but what's being made clear here is all about the character of his ministry. He is to speak God's words to God's people, whether they heed him or not.

Verse 1, I will speak with you, and verse 7, you will speak my words to them. And he goes right on, verse 6, look, be not afraid of them or their words or their looks.

[ 15 : 36 ] You're going to be very unpleasant words and very dirty looks. And you're naturally going to find this very difficult and even frightening. So God's call to him here is to realism about the grim rejection of his word, especially among his own household, whom he calls in verse 3, a nation of rebels.

Their fathers transgressed, rebelled against God's rule, and the descendants are just as impudent and stubborn, he says, verse 4. Rebels, rebellion, and refusal.

That's the repeated refrain all through these verses. So this authority of ministry of God's word will look like it has no power and no authority as people refuse it and won't heed it.

And it will feel like for God's servant, look at verse 6, crawling through thorns and sitting on scorpions. I wonder if you find that a very attractive ministry to be commissioned to.

I expect Ezekiel must have felt very weak and very sore and very fearful and he most certainly did as his ministry unfolded, just as Paul did in Corinth. I came in weakness and fear and trembling, he said.

[16:56] When people saw him as the very antithesis of a plausible speaker, and most of them scorned and rejected his message. But expect that, God says to Ezekiel, just as he said to Isaiah in Isaiah chapter 6 after his great commissioning.

He said to Isaiah, I'm sending you to a people who will be willingly blind and willingly deaf indefinitely. And that was not just an Old Testament phenomenon, by the way.

Jesus quotes those very words about his own ministry, and it seemed to his disciples that it wasn't having any effect and wasn't having any power, just as Paul quoted them about his own ministry at the ends of Acts in Acts 28.

But they too, like Ezekiel, were sent, verse 3, I send you. Verse 4, again, I send you. Again, twice in chapter 3, verses 5 and 6, I'm sending you.

Why on earth send his prophet to such a recalcitrant people? Well, because God is a just judge, and he will insist that people have heard his warning, so they can't blame him for what happens.

[18:12] and of course, because God is also merciful, because he takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked. He wants people to repent. That's a watchword of Ezekiel's message again and again.

And one day, they will know that it was God's truth that they so scorned. God tells Ezekiel, there will be recognition of his true witness.

Verse 5, they will know that a prophet was among them. God will do what his word says it will do, and then they will know that he is to be believed, and they'll know who truly does speak authoritatively for him.

That was Elijah's prayer we saw the other week, wasn't it? Exactly that, that rebellious Israel would know the one true God, and know that Elijah was his genuine spokesman. And friends, the call to be God's true workman is always the same, it's always to realism about the rebellious rejection of true ministry that there's going to be, but it's also to know that true witness will be recognized in the end, even if it only is at the very end, on the last day, when everything is revealed, about our work, whether we have been building with gold and silver and precious stones, or whether it was just wood and straw and stubble.

But we need to know that, don't we? And we need to be realistic. Those who are called to be leaders and spokesmen for God need to heed Paul's words to Timothy in 2 Timothy chapter 1.

[19:57] But this is a call, says Paul, to share in suffering for the gospel by the power of God, who called us to this holy calling. That's the pattern of ministry you learned from me, says to Timothy.

And remember, it was that pattern of ministry that caused everybody in the whole of Asia, by the way, to desert me, because they were ashamed of my chains. Didn't want their friends to know that they were associated with this sort of chap who was now imprisoned and so out of kilter with polite society.

But don't you be ashamed like that, he says to Timothy, because real ministry is like that. It's briars and thorns and scorpions. And that's just from those within the church, he's saying, never mind the outsiders.

And all of us as Christians, all of us are called, aren't we, to be workers in God's field. You've been called to follow the steps of Christ, who suffered for you, says Peter. It's been granted to you to suffer for his sake, says Paul.

And we're all sent, like Ezekiel, in a way, sent by God into the world to be his witnesses, sent out like lambs among wolves.

[21:14] But don't be afraid of them, says our Lord, or their words, or their faces, because as he said to the first disciples, I'm sending the promised spirit upon you, and you will have power to witness.

And that power at work will do God's work, but as it does it, it will also provoke all of these kinds of responses to your ministry as well. And that's the way it's been right at the very beginning of the church.

Read through Acts, read church history. The call to Christ's fellow workers is a call to realism. There will be rejection, there will be plenty of refusal and pain.

But, one day, they will know that it was God's true words that they heard. Even if it is only on the very last day when they hear the Lord of glory saying to them, when you did what you did to one of the least of these, you did it to me.

But they will know. And what was so painful for Ezekiel, as for Paul and our Lord himself, was that the worst rejection was from those who had the most privileged background and knowledge of the things of God.

[ 22 : 36 ] It was those within the household of God. And so it would be so easy for him, wouldn't it? And so easy for all who are called to that kind of ministry to become bitter, to become disillusioned by that.

God. And that's surely why this next section is here, because it lays out what must be the true character of God's witnesses.

See, the message from verses 8 of chapter 2 right down to chapter 3, verse 15, is that the true witness of God must himself be both personally receptive of the gospel word and powerfully resilient for the gospel word.

The first two paragraphs speak of this image of eating the scroll of God's book. Ezekiel himself is first of all to receive God's word deeply into his own soul, before he can speak to others.

He himself must receive God's word with penitent faith. Verse 8, you must hear what I say. You must heed it. You must not be rebellious. You must be repentant.

[ 23 : 46 ] See, only a humble recipient of God's word can speak God's word to others. No matter how much knowledge they might think that they have. Ezekiel had plenty of knowledge, didn't he? He spent his whole life training as a priest.

Verse 8, open your mouth and eat what I give you. Verse 1 of chapter 3, eat this scroll and then go and speak.

Only when you have inwardly digested the word of God so it's changed your life and shaped your life, only then can your lips be the authoritative vehicle of that living and transforming truth of God. And that's a very humbling thing. Ezekiel has to show that he's willing to swallow whatever God commands him. He doesn't get to choose his own message.

He can't just go out and go on and on about his own hobby horses endlessly, as some preachers do. He's given this huge book, verse 10, a scroll filled with writing on both sides, not just one side as usual.

[ 24 : 54 ] And he had to swallow it all. A relentlessly tough message of lamentation, mourning, and woe. I mean, you can imagine Ezekiel in his mind thinking, can't you, and saying, Lord, I don't want to be labeled like another Jeremiah.

I don't want to be called the doom and gloom preacher of woe. And God says, verse 1, eat this scroll. Verse 3, feed your belly on this scroll.

And then I ate it, says Ezekiel, and it was in my mouth as sweet as honey. That seems very strange, doesn't it? Does it mean that suddenly Ezekiel rejoices perversely in this hard message of woe and judgment?

No, not at all, not that. But what it does mean is that even amid great distress and burdened with this draining ministry for the Lord, even there there is a sweet fellowship with the Lord in loving obedience to His command that perhaps comes no other way.

as James the Apostle puts it, He gives more grace. God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. Submit yourselves therefore to God, He says, and He will draw near to you.

[ 26 : 25 ] That's what Ezekiel is experiencing. Jeremiah describes the same thing in I think it's chapter 15 of his prophecy. He says, I've become a man of strife and contention to the whole land.

for your sake I bear reproach. And yet he goes on, your words were found and I ate them. And your words became to me a joy and a delight in my heart, for I am called by your name.

He's identified deeply with his God. And it had been granted to him not only to believe but also to suffer for his sake, to use Paul's words.

He knew that, you see, to share in the power of Christ's resurrection would issue in sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, says Paul.

And that has always been the pattern, always been the character of true witness to God and true power for God, whether it's in the former days like Ezekiel or in these latter days in which Paul lived

and in which we live.

[ 27 : 33 ] The true witness is identified fully with the Lord in his message. And that's what these verses are portraying. But the true witness is also fully identified with his people in their misery.

And that's vividly seen, isn't it, down in verse 15 where Ezekiel sat there, overwhelmed among them. But you, son of man, be not rebellious. Hear what I say to you.

You are among them receiving this message. The only a penitent man can be a powerful messenger of God's truth. A proud man cannot be that.

Only someone who is willing to swallow the whole truth and the task that God himself has given. God gave Ezekiel a relentless, fulsome message of lamentation and woe, says verse 10.

Double-sided, and he had to swallow the whole thing and deliver the whole thing. He could not soften the blow, not by subtracting from the message, it was on both sides, nor by adding to the message, there was nowhere else left to add anything.

[ 28 : 48 ] There was no gospel minus, no gospel plus. The whole counsel of God was his message, nothing less, but nothing more. And that's why as well as himself being a humble recipient of the gospel word, verses 4 to 11 show us that the true witness of God must also show hardened resilience for that whole gospel word.

Because true witness will be met with great resistance within the household of God, within the professing church. Verse 7, the house of Israel will not be willing to listen to you, for they are not willing to listen to me.

They have a hard forehead and a stubborn heart. That's the language of the Pharaoh who hardened himself against God's word. But they are worse than pagan outsiders because they had the privilege of the scriptures all their days.

But what they should have counted as a privilege, they had cherished instead with pride, hadn't they? And it hardened their hearts and it made them deaf to God's actual words to them.

That's a very sobering thing. That's a frightening thing, I think. Because you can have proudly sound theology hiding poisonous and stubborn hearts.

[ 30 : 12 ] Hearts that are worse than total outsiders. And that's what God says in verses 5 and 6. I'm not sending you to pagan foreigners who don't know anything about the faith, who have all sorts of barriers to communication and language.

If I sent them to them, they would listen. Like the godless Assyrian Ninevites listened, remember, to Jonah. But it's going to be far worse than that for you, Ezekiel, because I'm sending you to my church, full of hard-hearted and proud and stubborn people.

It's quite shocking that, isn't it, really, to all of us, given that we are all sitting inside a church. Isn't the Christopher right? It's still tragically true that in some parts of the world the challenge of God's word receives a better hearing among those who have never heard it before than among the established churches who have grown hard and deaf in their resistance to the movement of God's spirit.

And the warning of Jesus still confronts our complacency and our privileged theology with the disturbing thought that there will be some who have never heard the gospel of the works of Jesus at all, but who will fare far better in the final judgment than some who have heard but have refused to respond with real faith and obedience.

That's the people that Ezekiel was sent to. And in answer to their hardness, God says, he will make his servant unbending and immovable.

[ 31 : 45 ] Verse 8, I have made your face as hard as their faces, your forehead as hard as their foreheads, harder than flint I have made your forehead. So you see, there's a right way to be hardened for God's word, not against it, and that also is an essential characteristic of true witness.

He's not saying, don't mistake, he's not saying that Ezekiel is to just exhibit haughty dogmatism in his ministry. I'm sure many of us know people like that, certainly doesn't commend the gospel, nor does it nurture God's people.

He's not saying that, but what he is saying is that he must be characterized by humble determination, by a flint-like resolve not to shrink back in fear, but to speak forthrightly the word of God, both in season and out of season.

Verse 10, all God's words, not swerving from the controversial ones. It's all got to fill your heart and your mind, he says, so you've taken it all in clearly, so that you know you really are speaking God's words.

Thus says the Lord, whether they hear or whether they refuse. And again, the ultimate issue is not whether they heed him, but that in time they will know the word of God has truly been spoken among them.

[ 33 : 18 ] As God says they will, chapter 2, verse 5. But for that kind of true witness you will need hardened resilience. I wonder how you feel about that as you think about your life and your witness.

Do you balk at that? I think I do, naturally. And he's telling us, isn't he, exactly what Jesus tells us, that the world will hate you because it hated me first.

If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you if you stand truly for me. Just like verse 7 here. And Jesus himself had that flint-like face of determination in his ministry.

He set his face towards Jerusalem, says Luke chapter 9. But the people did not receive him because his face was set towards Jerusalem.

He spoke all God's words with a determined toughness, didn't he, our Lord? It didn't shrink from terrible warnings. Read Matthew 23, the litany of woes to the religious leaders of the day.

[ 34 : 30 ] That was a toughness. But it was a toughness, wasn't it, suffused also with tenderness as the Lord wept over his people.

Our Lord was wholly at one with a divine purpose to vindicate his holy glory and his righteousness in the world, and yet he was also identified with the weakness and with the woe of his own people in their state of sinful rebellion.

And you see, it's that shared identification, both with God and with man, that every true witness who is truly filled with the Spirit of God, they will exhibit, won't they?

And that's what we see here in Ezekiel. The verses 12 and 13 here in chapter 3 remind us of the power of his divine enabling. The Spirit lifts him up and he's reminded of the throne of God as the glory of the Lord arose from its place.

that's how the NIV translates verse 12 which is probably the better translation. It's a picture of the wings and the wheels on the move and the throne of God on the rise again. It's a reminder of God's power, God's presence to equip him for this task.

[ 35 : 46 ] And God always does, doesn't he, when God calls them, when he will enable them. It's interesting here in verse 8 that when it says, I will make your face hard, the word is strong, Hazak, and that's actually part of Ezekiel's own name, Hazak El, God makes strong.

He will give you the hardened resilience you need. In fact, what he's saying is, from your birth, from your naming, he's made you for this task. What a great comfort, you will know God's power, his strong hand upon you for good.

But, verse 14, that hand will at the same time lay a heavy burden on him and he's going to feel keenly that inner turmoil of what it means to be God's true witness.

I wept in bitterness in the heat of my spirit. He shares with God righteous indignation at such a hardened people, but he also feels deeply with them for what it means for them.

Verse 15, I sat where they were dwelling. I sat there, overwhelmed among them. A real man, says one writer, if he has felt the pressure of the divine hand in his message as he's proclaimed it.

[ 37 : 03 ] That pressure does not leave him. He's still all churned up inside. He still feels like weeping if nobody responds. He still feels the bitterness and the indignation of God against the rebellious people as God feels it.

Ezekiel was so caught up in the divine mind and heart that he shared in the divine suffering. And that also is the mark of the truly prophetic spirit.

That's surely always true, isn't it, of all true witness. It's part of the pain, part of the cost of being identified with those that God has called us to witness to.

Ezekiel sat where they sat, among them, not apart from them, even as they refused his ministry.

And that floored him physically. He was overwhelmed. There's a cost, personally, of speaking God's truth in love, isn't there?

It'll bring scars, sometimes overwhelming scars. Paul called his bodily scars the marks of Jesus.

And even the most hardened resilience for the gospel can't spare you those scars.

[ 38 : 21 ] It's the humble reception of those scars for the gospel alone that will actually breed that toughness that is suffused with tenderness in the true servant of the Lord.

It's a weighty thing, isn't it, to think about what's involved in the preparation of God's messengers.

But let me see why, you see, when we understand the purpose of God's message and the heavy responsibility that that brings.

And that's what we see in verses 16 to 21, which lays out this charge as God's watchman, which is laid on Ezekiel. And these verses show us that the true watchman of God bears a heavy responsibility themselves, but also confers a heavy responsibility on their hearers.

Personal responsibility for responding to God's word is a big theme in Ezekiel. It's worked through in detail in chapter 18 and again in chapter 33, where again the watchman's charge is reiterated. But here the chief focus is actually on the proclaimer's responsibility, not to fail in his charge. But these are both there. There is a heavy responsibility on those who are warned to respond.

[ 39 : 33 ] Verse 18, the unrepentant wicked person will die for his iniquity. Verse 19, the formerly righteous who turns to unrighteousness shall die. Just as in verse 21, the one who responds to the warning will live.

It's a personal responsibility. And chapter 18 gives much more detail on that. And the point is very clear. It's so that no one can blame anyone else and certainly not God if they've heard God's word of warning and they've refused him.

Because I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, says the Lord. So turn and live. But you see what these verses here tell us is that God will lay blame on his witnesses, on his workmen, if they fail in the task of being his true watchmen.

There's a heavy responsibility here on the watchman to speak. Verse 17, I've made you a watchman for the house of Israel. Wherever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them the warning from me.

They're all of the watchmen to look out, isn't it, from the walls, see the danger coming in time, and sound the warning trumpet, so people will react. And the reality that Ezekiel's people faced was that God's judgment was coming.

[ 40 : 44 ] In fact, verse 17, as I said, could be better read, I think, give them warning about me, because their real enemy was not the powers of the world, but it was God himself coming to judge them. Of course, no one believed that.

The establishment approved prophets said, no, no, no, there's no danger of that, better times lie ahead. Just as today, the media approved, the establishment approved clergy voices you'll ever hear today, will say exactly that.

There's no such thing, there's no such thing as absolute truth, there's no absolute bar of God's judgment, be true to yourself, do it your way, all will be well. And it's always been that way, hasn't it? Paul, Peter tells us it will be that way to the very end, scoffers, saying, oh, this world will just roll on merrily as it always has, ever more progressive, ever more permissive. God's God's judgment. But no, says Peter, they forget. They deliberately overlook the fact of God's judgments in history, every one of which portends and foreshadows the ultimate judgment one day.

[ 41 : 47 ] But you must not forget, you must warn people about me, he's saying here. I'm a righteous judge, I will punish sin, but I'm a God of grace and mercy and I want you to turn and to live.

And so whether it's in the face of a coming historical judgment as here or far more so, the coming ultimate judgment, God places heavy responsibilities on his witnesses to be true watchmen, to warn people, to call them to respond.

And he will hold them accountable if they don't speak. verse 18 and 19 speaks about calling the wicked to repent.

They need a warning. If they don't get one, his blood I will require at your hand. But if you do speak and he refuses, well, you've exonerated yourself. Same in verses 20 and 21 speaking about warning the righteous not to become complacent, not to drift into unrighteousness.

If they do because you have failed in your duty to warn them within the church, his blood I will require at your hand. It's very clear, isn't it? It's a weighty responsibility.

[ 43 : 01 ] And its weightiness all stems from the depth of God's mercy. I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked should turn from his way and lift.

That's what pleases God, not judgment, but salvation. That's what causes joy among the angels in heaven, not judgment, but salvation. God's warning, even Ezekiel's words of lamentation and mourning and woe are witness to the mercy and the kindness and the love of God.

And that's why the most unmerciful and unkind and unloving thing in the world is a watchman who knows what is coming, but doesn't pass on God's warning.

And that, we're told here, God thinks very seriously indeed. So every true witness must be a true watchman who warns all, both outside and within the professing church, where often we don't think we need those warnings, do we?

But what does Paul say again to the proud Corinthians? Let anyone who thinks he's standing firm take heed lest he fall. And likewise he commands Timothy, doesn't he, to rebuke, to warn the church.

[ 44 : 17 ] Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. For by doing so, you will save both yourself and your hearers. You'll be a true watchman. Chris Wright says, the task of rebuke and warning is difficult to do.

But to avoid it for the fear of hurting people's feelings is like a sentry failing to sound the alarm for fear of upsetting people by disturbing their sleep. It's a heavy responsibility.

We are our brother's keepers. We are our sister's keepers, are we not? But we do need to be careful, of course. We must pass on the warnings of God and make sure that it is God's word that we're passing on, not just our own.

It's the word from my mouth here to give a warning for me, he says. And that's very important. And I think it's what the last paragraph presses home for us, that God's workmen who bear witness to his warnings are always under the constraint of God's word.

Verses 22 to 27 make clear that the true man of God must be ready to bear both the weight of God's restraint and of man's refusal. Verse 22 sees Ezekiel conscious of God's hand upon him again, and the same glory appears to him again, and the same voice speaks to him.

[ 45 : 45 ] And when the Spirit lifts him up and he speaks, it seems very strange, doesn't it? Because it seems to contradict what's just been said about speaking as a warning watchman. Because the Spirit speaks to him about a heavy hand of restraint upon him, by man, but also by God himself.

Do you see? He's to be shut away, verse 24, in his house, tied up and restrained, so he can't go out among the people to witness. Now that might well speak about literal restraint by him being incarcerated.

That's what happened to Jeremiah. And in Jeremiah chapter 29, it speaks about it happening to prophets in Babylon, and that may well refer to Ezekiel. If that's true, that's just a reminder, isn't it? That cancel culture isn't new. Censorship and all kinds of restraints used by governments and establishment religion has gone on all through history to silence God's word.

Nothing new in that. But there's more than that here, because Ezekiel is under God's restraint as well. He's his prisoner. I will render you mute, he says in verse 26, so you're unable to speak, unable not to reprove them, but rather to mediate, unable to intercede for this rebellious house.

[ 46 : 59 ] Just as Jeremiah was told, you're not allowed to pray for this people, they've gone too far. He's under God's hand of restraint. He can't just speak and pray as he feels.

only, verse 27, when God specifically opens his mouth and gives him words for them. And then he must speak, thus says the Lord God.

Not his thoughts, but God's clear word. But not only does God's servant know the heavy hand of God's restraint on him, he also experiences himself, the heavy heart of man's refusal of God.

His own life circumstances are going to dramatize God's interaction with his people. He's going to be shut up, house bound in a siege, just as Jerusalem is going to be besieged by Babylon.

And he's going to be dumb because God's relationship with his people is broken and is reduced to silence. And so Ezekiel himself somehow personally enters into this great drama, both from God's side and from his people's side.

[ 48 : 13 ] He shares personally in the story of God's pain and in the ruptured relationship between God and his people due to their sin. And we'll see that later most dramatically in chapter 24 when God says to Ezekiel, he's going to take from him his wife, the delight of your eyes.

She's going to die as a sign that God is going to take from Israel, the delight of their eyes, Jerusalem and its temple. What an agonizing cost for that servant of the Lord to bear in order to deliver his message, don't you think?

But you see that personal entering in to the service of the word of God begins right here, right at the beginning of his ministry. That is the constraint of God's word on the lives of those who are totally bound up in his service.

That's what it meant to be a man that the hand of the Lord was strong upon. Do you see? Every part of his life, every act, every word was constrained only and always by that divine hand. Do you think we should be surprised at this extraordinary picture of authentic ministry that we see here in Ezekiel? When we know of the one who would experience that ultimate constraint of God's word in human flesh, the one charged with the ultimate witness to God's glory and grace and to his judgment and salvation, the one in whom as the ultimate recipient of God's call, the one in whom the eternal word himself became flesh and dwelled among us with his people, sat where we were dwelling, bearing our misery, and with hardened resilience set his face like flint towards Jerusalem to enter into our suffering, where God's spirit lifted him up amid the great revelation of the glory of God.

[ 50 : 25 ] And as the apostle says, through the eternal spirit, he offered himself without blemish to God for his people, bearing the heavy heart of man's refusal of God himself, under the heavy hand of God.

What does Ezekiel say? The spirit lifted me up and took me away, and I went up in bitterness, in the heat of my spirit, the hand of the Lord being strong upon me.

You see, Ezekiel was learning what Jesus meant when he said, whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, my servant will be.

And we need to learn that too, don't we? If we want to serve under God's strong hand, hand, and for that power of the hand of God to be at work through our lives personally and corporately.

That's why these chapters are here. They're here to show us something about what real service of Christ means, and what real service of Christ costs.

[ 51 : 52 ] So, verse 27, he who will hear, let him hear. And he will refuse to hear. Let him refuse.

Amen. Let's pray. Lord, speak to us, we pray. Amen. Speak your word deep into our heart, that we may be humble recipients of your gospel, penitent people, that you might thereby lift us up and speak through us this word of grace and mercy and power for salvation.

Help us, we pray, and lead us and teach us and use us for your glory. Amen.